THE FIRST (ONE OF THE FIRST, AT LEAST) CHRISTIAN REVOLUTIONARY: RELIGION AND POLITICS
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Psalm 1
Matthew 22:15–22
Romans 13:1–2
Daniel 6:12a, 13, 16a, 21–22
Acts 5:27–29

"We must obey God rather than any human authority"
Acts 5:29 (NRSV)

My heart to you, I offer, Lord,
promptly and sincerely.

John Calvin
(1509–1564)
Inscribed on his personal seal

You have already startled us with a beautiful new day, sun and blue sky.
Now startle us with your truth, revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

It was a sight that must have struck terror in the hearts of the Communist leaders of East Germany: thousands and thousands of people, gathering in churches and then flooding the streets, holding candles, singing hymns, demanding their freedom. I have kept a symbol of it for years: an ugly chunk of concrete, a piece of the Berlin Wall, picked up and given to me by a member of this church at the time of the wall's dramatic destruction.

The year 2009 is the 500th anniversary of the birth of John Calvin, and it is the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Communist regime in East Germany, which led to the collapse of the Soviet Union and Communist regimes in Eastern Europe. The two events are related. It was a great moment: who will ever forget the pictures of East Germans, young people mostly, standing on top of the wall, waving flags, and with hammers and screwdrivers and their bare hands tearing down the wall that had divided their nation and capital for more than two decades: a free, democratic society on one side; a grim, tightly controlled totalitarian society on the other. My favorite image is of the distinguished cellist

Mstislav Rostropovich, sitting on a kitchen chair in front of the partially destroyed Berlin Wall, playing a Bach Unaccompanied Suite for Cello. Rostropovich was a refugee himself, from Soviet Communism, living in exile in Paris. When the wall and the regime began to crumble, he knew he had to be there: bought a plane ticket for himself and one for his cello and flew to Berlin to play.

Churches in East Germany are celebrating the peaceful revolution, sometimes called the "Protestant Revolution," this year. By the spring of 1989, the people of East Germany, and cities like Leipzig, had had enough of state control of every aspect of their lives. In April of that year there was an ecumenical assembly in East Germany, with delegates from all the main churches, Lutheran and Reformed. The Communist regime had ruthlessly suppressed the churches. Marxist-Leninist ideology held that religion was irrelevant and unnecessary, an opiate of the people. There was no place for religion and churches in the new society the Communists were determined to build. Known Christians were barred from party membership, which meant they could not work in any state agency, the government, universities, hospitals, or executive levels of business and industry. Children of known Christians were denied admission to good schools. A few churches were allowed to remain open to try to convince the world that there was freedom of religion (the current Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, is the daughter of a pastor of one of those churches). Many prominent churches were turned into museums, libraries, warehouses. The presence of the large, magnificent Gothic church on the campus of Leipzig University was an embarrassment to the regime, so it was blown up and replaced with a gray administration building. In April 1989 that courageous assembly of Christians did something unheard of: demanded their freedom, the freedom that was their God-given right and which does not exist in authoritarian states, Marxist or any other kind. Totalitarian leaders all understand that personal freedom undermines their power and authority. That assembly demanded freedom of opinion and speech, freedom to travel, freedom to form independent associations. One of the leaders of that assembly, Bishop Christopher Kähler, says that the ecumenical assembly was the "handwriting on the wall."

After work people started flocking to churches that were still open to sing hymns and pray, light candles, and then stream into the streets in silent protest. In Leipzig, at the huge Nikolai Kirche, hundreds, then thousands of East Germans gathered, lighted candles, marched into the town square, filled the streets. The crowds grew until there were so many of them they filled the ring road around the city, holding candles.

A member of the politburo, Horst Snidermann, said later, "We were prepared for everything, but not candles and prayers" (see *Presbyterian*

Outlook, 1 June 2009). The Communist regime, one of the tightest and most oppressive in the world, quickly and quietly collapsed.

John Calvin at first would have been horrified at the chaos, the disintegration of public order and control. But had he thought about it, he would have had to acknowledge that some of the ideas he expressed five centuries earlier were very much the source of that act of public, political protest and demand for political and personal liberty. He had indeed written that there are occasions when it is the right and duty of the Christian to disobey and defy the authorities. He was a law-and-order leader himself, but there is a direct line from his ideas about liberty and the freedom of the human conscience to those brave Christians holding their candles, singing hymns, and bringing down their own government.

He was a Frenchman, born in 1509, a brilliant scholar who studied theology at the Sorbonne—the theological faculty of the University of Paris—and law at Orleans. Calvin was simply one of the most brilliant, if not the most brilliant, intellects of his age. In a new biography, Yale's Bruce Gordon says, "Calvin felt as if he had never met his intellectual equal and he was probably right" (*Calvin*, Preface). In Paris, Calvin was intrigued by the new religious thinking coming from Germany, from Martin Luther, a priest and professor at Wittenberg. The University of Paris became a kind of hotbed of Reformation thinking: both King Henry I and his sister Marguerite of Navarre favored the new thinking. But then the French king changed his mind. There was a famous incident: one night placards criticizing and mocking the Mass showed up all over Paris, one of them on the door of the king's bedchamber. The king was not amused; he had arrested, imprisoned, and executed at the stake several suspects. Calvin fled his native, beloved France; ended up in Geneva, where he remained from 1536 1564 until his death in 1564 at the age of 54. Actually there was a period of several years when he was driven out of the city by the city council for stirring up so much trouble but then was invited to return.

Calvin wrote and studied, wrote and studied, then studied and wrote some more—every day, all day. He was the intellectual engine of the Reformation. If Luther was its heart, Calvin was the brain of the Reformation. He wrote a classic of Christian theology that students are still reading and studying, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. His influence was amplified by the vigorous book publishing industry in Geneva. Book publishers loved Calvin because he wrote so much that everyone wanted to read. Everyone in Europe—kings, emperors, bishops and cardinals and scholars—read him and had an opinion about him.

The Reformation rediscovered the Bible and put it into the vernacular and into the hands of the people. Calvin was an accomplished and creative student of scripture. He wrote lengthy commentaries on almost every book

in the Bible, and it was while writing a commentary on the Old Testament book of Daniel that his mind began to change about politics and religion. (Funny how that happens: if you don't want your assumptions challenged and your mind changed, you should definitely avoid the Bible.)

The Bible, in fact, has several things to say about political authority—and Calvin knew them all. The most familiar is St. Paul, writing to the church in Rome: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities: for there is no authority except from God and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed." Dictators like that verse a lot. So do law-and-order people; so do parents. Obey the rules. Calvin's age believed that was true and applicable in every situation: obey—don't resist—the authorities, all the way from parents to kings and emperors. Authority is from God; those who have it are ordained to have it. We know that Paul wrote that when he was a prisoner of the Roman Empire. He was writing to the church in Rome. The last thing he needed was to be seen advocating disobedience to the empire. The last thing the church needed, already under suspicion, was someone going on about civil disobedience.

Earlier Paul had written, "For freedom Christ has set us free." Peter, under arrest and on trial in Jerusalem, was ordered to cease and desist from preaching the gospel: "We gave you strict orders not to teach in his name, yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching." Peter says "We must obey God rather than any human authority."

Jesus himself gave a brilliant answer one day when asked whether it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. There were people at the time who argued that it was illegal to pay Roman taxes, that good Jews should resist the occupying Romans by refusing to pay their taxes. Judas Iscariot may have been one of them. "Give Caesar what is his," Jesus said. "Give God what is God's"—that is, everything you are and ever will be. Obey Caesar, but your ultimate obedience and loyalty is to God, even when the two are in conflict.

But the text that forced Calvin to reexamine his law-and-order inclination and flirt with rebellion was the Old Testament story in the book of Daniel of the fiery furnace and of Daniel and the lions' den. They are great stories. The people of Israel are in exile in Babylon. The king, Nebuchadnezzar, hears that some of them are not obeying the law when it comes to religious practice. They won't bow to the king's favorite statue, representing the authority of the king. So he arrests three young men with wonderful names —Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—and orders them to bow or go to the fiery furnace. They say, "We will not serve your gods nor worship the golden statue." Later, another king orders Daniel to stop praying to God and pray to him, the king. Daniel disobeys, is thrown into the lions' den. They all survive because of God's intercession. But the point is made and Calvin got

it: there are occasions when you don't have to obey the king and, in fact, it is your duty, your religious duty, to resist. In spite of himself, Calvin began to flirt with rebellion. A king who acts contrary to the law of God is no longer king, he wrote, a truly revolutionary sentiment. And ever since, brave people of faith have put their lives on the line, resisting authority that was wrong and immoral: Bonhoeffer and his fellow conspirators who concluded that it was their Christian responsibility not to be subject to Nazi authority but to resist it with everything in them, up to and including assassinating Adolph Hitler. Rosa Parks, James Meredith, Martin Luther King Jr., who decided it was a patriotic and religious responsibility to resist, disobey, and break the law. And Archbishop Oscar Romero, refusing to stop criticizing the brutal dictatorship in El Salvador and paying with his life.

The actual, historical context for Calvin's flirtation with rebellion is fascinating. He was a victim of persecution, a refugee from France. Every year after Calvin fled, official persecution of French Protestants—called Huguenots—was intensified in Paris and all over France. Harassed, arrested, tortured, executed, Huguenot leaders were Calvin's friends and followers. He was so appalled by what was happening to them that he dedicated his commentary on Daniel, with its dangerous flirtation with revolution, to them.

The persecution continued to intensify. Eight years after Calvin's death, beginning on August 24, 1572, on the Feast Day of St. Bartholomew, street violence against the Huguenots broke out in the streets of Paris. It was apparently carefully planned and orchestrated by the government. Men, women, and children were butchered in the streets. The violence spread to other cities and lasted for months. The death toll is estimated to have been 30,000. Some historians say it was closer to 100,000. Many prominent Huguenot leaders died. The St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre is so appalling we'd almost rather not know about it. When news of the massacre arrived in Rome, the pope commissioned a celebratory mass and ordered a special medal to be struck. The Vatican has recently apologized, but the repercussions were enormous. France never had a large Protestant population again. And the Huguenots who survived, migrating to Holland, Scotland, and eventually to America, became radicalized. They remembered what Calvin had said about resisting a bad king. They became enthusiastic supporters of the American Revolution (see William Stacy Johnson, *John Calvin: Reformer for the Twenty-First Century*, p. 112).

Time magazine earlier this year included "New Calvinism" as one of the "ten ideas changing the world right now." David Van Biema wrote a very peculiar article that attributed New Calvinism to a fundamentalist Southern Baptist leader and hard-edged, in-your-face, megachurch pastor, totally missing the enormously important Calvinist ideas that shaped our nation and still resonate deeply and still change the world.

That because we are saved by God's grace in Jesus Christ, we are free from religious legalism to live responsible lives in the world. Calvin strengthened Luther's revolutionary idea that we don't earn God's favor by doing good things: we have God's favor and do good out of our profound and joyful gratitude.

That Jesus Christ is Lord of all—individuals and communities and social arrangements—so Christian life is to be lived not merely inside the church or in the safety of the monastery but in the city streets and marketplaces and courtrooms. Spirituality, for Calvin, was worldly and had public and political implications.

That those in authority are accountable to the people and that people have the God-given right to choose those who will have authority, an idea that would deepen and grow and come full flower in the Declaration of Independence.

That a society, a city, a nation can be good and that its goodness is always measured by the way it supports and extends a helping hand to its poorest, most vulnerable.

For Calvin, the poorest and most vulnerable were the literally thousands of refugees fleeing religious persecution in France, Scotland, Holland, Poland —all over Europe—who came to Geneva as a refuge of freedom and compassion. Calvin established the office of deacon in the church for the express purpose of helping the hungry, homeless refugees and created a civic fund to provide loans to help people get back on their feet.

That is an idea that has timeless importance: a society is good to the degree that it cares for its own poor, an idea that surfaces again and again in our own society. I don't think Calvin would favor one health care reform bill over another, Republican or Democratic. But I am certain that the availability of adequate health care for every American, as a right not a privilege for those who can afford it, would be a priority for him.

He would remind us that we are all in this together and that while our vaunted American individualism serves us well in many ways, we are also responsible for one another and that governments exist—to quote the Preamble to our Constitution—"to promote the general welfare." A health care system that provides access to health care for all is not socialism; it is an example of the miracle that is American constitutional democracy.

What does a Calvinist church look like in 2009, 500 years later? The popular stereotype would be a group of rigid, moralistic, unbending, humorless

pietists. Calvinists have been that, to be sure. But a true Calvinist church would be—

> A church where the gospel of God's unconditional love in Jesus Christ is regularly proclaimed and celebrated
>
> A church where the sovereignty of God is so revered that no creed or church structure, no individual, is granted absolute ultimate authority
>
> A church where every individual is welcomed and affirmed as a child of God, loved by God with an everlasting love; a church where no one is excluded; a church where the children are a priority, nurtured and taught and valued and loved,
>
> A church that advocates in the world for the poor and that in its own life lives thoroughly in the world, extends a helping, healing hand in the name of Jesus Christ to everyone and anyone who is hungry, cold, alone, frightened, anyone who is in need.

I'm not neutral about this, but I think I can see a faithful church in the tradition of John Calvin around here all the time.

Every weekday at noon, Elam Davies Social Service Center staff members and volunteers from the entire staff and congregation give food—bag lunches—to hungry people who line up and enter on Chestnut Street to receive what, for many, will be the only food for the day.

A while ago, a man in a suit and tie stood watching across the street, finally got in the line and presented himself to the staff person on duty. "What's going on here?" he asked. "We're giving lunches to hungry people" was the answer; "would you like a bag lunch?" (Since the financial crisis, people occasionally wait for food in business attire.) "No thank you," he said, "but I would like to help"—and he handed the volunteer a check for $250.

Calvin, I am sure, smiled. Amen.